

Information for patients who have Superficial Thrombophlebitis

Hospital: _____

Contact phone numbers: _____

What is superficial thrombophlebitis?

Superficial veins are the ones that you can often see or feel just under the skin. Superficial thrombophlebitis, is often called **phlebitis**. It is the term for an inflamed vein near the surface of the skin caused by a blood clot. Phlebitis causes painful, hard lumps underneath the skin and redness of the skin but it is not usually serious.

What causes superficial thrombophlebitis?

It may be caused by a slight injury to the vein. There are also other risk factors that make it more likely for the vein to become inflamed.

- **Varicose veins**
People who have varicose veins in their legs may get phlebitis.
- **Injections into the vein or ‘drips’**
You may get phlebitis if you have had an injection into your vein (intravenous or IV injections) or a drip (intravenous or IV infusion) in hospital.
- **Previous problems with veins**
If you have had phlebitis or a deep vein thrombosis (DVT) in the past you are more likely to get phlebitis.
- **Blood clotting factors**
Using the contraceptive pill, hormone replacement therapy and smoking can cause blood clots to develop. Conditions such as cancer, pregnancy and some blood conditions can also cause blood clots to develop more easily than usual.
- **Blood flowing more slowly than normal**
This can happen in varicose veins, during long flights, if you are not able to move around much or if you have had major surgery.

How is it treated?

Phlebitis is not caused by infection, so antibiotics are not helpful. Usually the clot clears within a few weeks and the swelling and pain goes away. If it is caused by varicose veins it may return.

To help reduce pain and swelling you can:

- **raise the leg** to help reduce swelling
- **keep active** to keep the blood circulating
- **place a warm flannel** over the vein to ease any pain
- **take anti-inflammatory painkillers** such as aspirin or ibuprofen to ease any pain. These should be avoided if you have been prescribed a blood thinning medicine such as rivaroxaban.
- **use an anti-inflammatory cream or gel** such as ibuprofen gel if the area affected is only small

If your condition is more severe your doctor may prescribe compression stockings, gel, tablets or an injection. This is to stop the clot from growing larger or spreading to deep veins.

What should I look out for?

The swelling and pain will usually settle within a few weeks. Most people make a full recovery. The possible complications listed below are uncommon but see a doctor as soon as possible if you suspect that a complication is developing.

Infection

Sometimes the vein becomes infected. The pain may then become worse and the redness spreads. You may feel generally unwell. Infection is more common:

- If you have had a drip inserted for a long period
- If you have a weakened immune system
- If you use 'street drugs'

Antibiotics are needed to treat the infection. If the infection is severe, you may need to be admitted to hospital for antibiotics given directly into a

vein. Rarely, infection in a vein becomes severe and may spread to other areas of the body.

Blood clot extension

In some cases, the blood clot can travel further up the vein. If the clot extends to where the superficial and deep veins join, a DVT can develop. This is more likely if the phlebitis is in the upper thigh or the groin near to where the superficial veins and the deep veins of the leg meet. There is also a meeting point of superficial and deep veins at the crease behind the knee. Blood clot extension is more likely to occur:

- If phlebitis develops in a previously normal vein (not a varicose vein)
- If you have had a DVT before
- If you are immobile for some reason

See a doctor urgently or phone 111:

- If inflammation, redness, or hardness spreads up your inner thigh towards your groin or is around the back of your knee or calf
- If your whole leg swells
- If the pain becomes suddenly worse
- If you develop any new breathing problems or develop chest pains. Sometimes a clot from a DVT breaks off and travels to the lung.

Treatment for superficial thrombophlebitis

In some circumstances a doctor or nurse may recommend a blood thinning medicine to reduce the risk of blood clot extension. This may be a tablet called **rivaroxaban** or an injection called **enoxaparin** used every day for 6 weeks.

If the blood clot is very close to where the superficial and deep veins join medication may need to be given for 3 months. You may receive an initial medication supply from a hospital clinic and the remainder of the treatment course from your GP.

Make sure you know how long you have been recommended to take blood thinning medication for. Always take your medicine as instructed by your prescriber and as directed on the label on your medicine.

Side effects of blood thinning medicines

Like all medicines blood thinners may cause side effects. As we are all different these will vary from one person to another.

As these medicines slow down your body's ability to clot, a common side effect is an increased risk of bleeding – either external, visible blood or internal bleeding inside the body.

Symptoms of bleeding include:

- nosebleeds that last more than 10 minutes
- severe or prolonged bleeding from gums (contact dentist for advice)
- blood in vomit or your spit
- passing blood in your urine or faeces (stools)
- recent onset of black faeces (stools)
- severe bruising or extensive bruising for no reason
- unusual headaches
- significant increase in, or unexplained, dizziness, tiredness, paleness,
- weakness
- for women, heavy or increased bleeding during your period or any other vaginal bleeding

If you have any symptoms of bleeding, tell your doctor or visit your nearest A&E department immediately so that you can be monitored and have your treatment assessed.

For a full list of side effects, please read the Patient Information Leaflet with your medicine. If you think you are experiencing side effects at any time, contact your doctor or pharmacist for immediate advice.

References

Tidy, C (2018) *Superficial Thrombophlebitis*, Available at: <https://patient.info/health/varicose-veins-leaflet/superficial-thrombophlebitis> (Accessed: 13th November 2018)